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COVERING THE FOREIGN NEWS

By Harry Schwartz

SPARKED by Vice President Spiro Agnew's critical remarks last fall, there has been much discussion of the news media in recent months, particularly as regards their objectivity, their concentration of ownership and the like. These questions must be regarded as important regardless of one's political views. They deserve even more probing and wider examination than they have received to date. But to confine the debate to the issues raised by Mr. Agnew is grossly inadequate, for there are other equally or even more fundamental matters that need airing. How large are the resources this nation devotes to keeping itself informed on current events? How are they distributed by the media as a whole and by the major media separately as among major areas of attention? Are changes in the amount or distribution of these resources required to create a better-informed citizenry capable of making more intelligent decisions? It is strange that in this land of numerous and wealthy foundations so little effort has been made to provide a comprehensive overall picture of the organization and operation of the news media and an evaluation of how well they perform their functions. This article is intended to serve as a contribution to the needed larger discussion.

Domestic news, of course, usually dominates the media quantitatively. For most Americans, events in their local communities, their states, and finally in the United States as a whole are normally of greatest interest. A time of war is the great exception to this generalization. The young Americans fighting in Vietnam make that story of primary importance for this country's media, an importance enhanced by the violent domestic controversy about that struggle. There are other special foreign situations that from time to time command major public interest here: a war in the Middle East, a major purge in the Kremlin, the opening of a world's fair in Montreal or Osaka, the Olympic Games in Mexico City. But these are the exceptions. Even in this age of instantaneous communication, supersonic airplanes and ballistic missiles, most foreign developments are of secondary interest to domestic news for most Americans—and correspondingly for the majority of citizens in other countries.

This has one advantage for anyone interested in American journalism (using that term in the widest sense to cover all the media). Foreign news coverage is a smaller and more manageable area for examination than domestic news coverage. Thus most individual newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television stations do not have foreign correspondents of their own. They rely for their foreign news on the wire services and—in the case of network-affiliated radio and television stations—network correspondents. Most newspapers and stations that have no foreign coverage of their own defend this lack by arguing that their readers have relatively little interest in such news. The corollary of that lack of interest is lack of knowledge—sometimes quite an appalling lack of knowledge. Little more than a decade ago, for example, a sample study by *The New York*